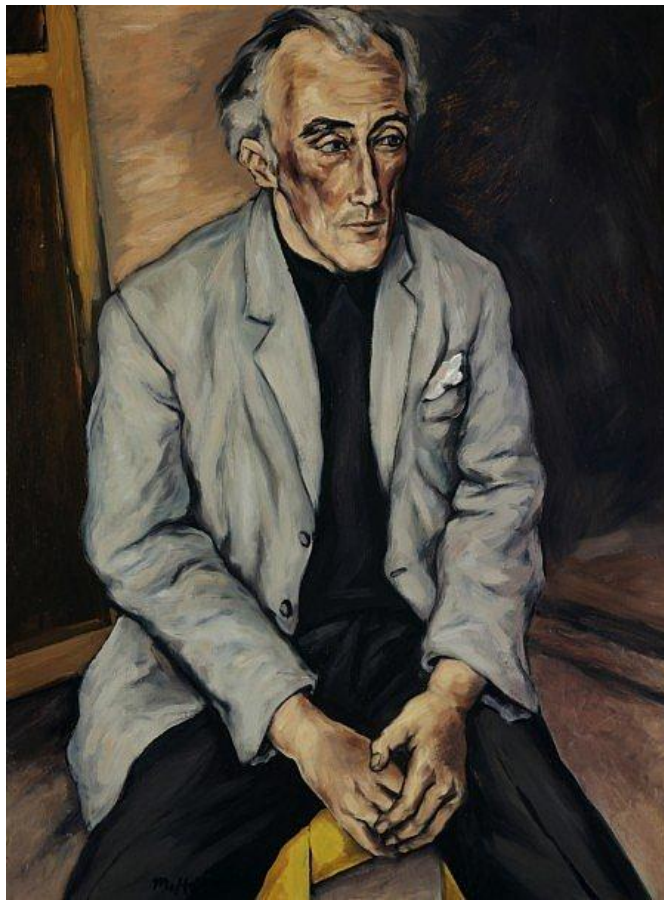


NORMAN MacCAIG

National 5: Revision Booklet



Pupil Name:

Class:

Visiting Hour

In summary: The poet is visiting a very ill relative in hospital, and tries to avoid his emotions on his way to the ward. When he arrives and sees her, he is overcome by grief and anguish. When he leaves at the end of the visiting hour, he feels helpless and seems to believe there is no hope that she will recover.

Word choice: "hospital smell" is something everyone is familiar with.

Visiting Hour

The **hospital smell**
combs my nostrils
as they **go bobbing along**

Metaphor/word choice: the smell is overpowering – it becomes a comb brushing against his nose harshly. This is a playful image – he has not seen the patient yet, so is 'keeping it together' at this point.

green and yellow corridors.

Word choice: colours have connotations of sickness, which further stresses the poet's discomfort in these surroundings.

What seems a **corpse**
is trundled into a lift and **vanishes**
heavenward.

Word choice: 'corpse,' 'vanishes' and 'heavenward' have connotations of death, which suggest that this is what the poet is beginning to think about as he walks through the corridor.

Enjambment: the poet takes a new line to give these 'key' words more emphasis. 'Heavenward' even gets a line to itself.

I will not feel, I will not
feel, until
I have to.

Repetition: Poet seems to be chanting to himself – trying to control his emotions.

Nurses walk lightly, swiftly,
here and up and down and there,

Structure: the unusual word order is **emphasising** the **number of nurses** he sees and how busy they are.

their slender waists **miraculously**
carrying their burden

Word choice: the poet **admires** the **difficult job** nurses have facing death regularly. "Miraculously" suggests he cannot understand how they do it.

Repetition of "so" emphasises the number of unpleasant situations the nurses have to deal with.

of so much pain, so
many deaths, their eyes
still clear after
so many farewells.

Structure: A minor sentence (non-sentence) draws attention to this **turning point** in the poem. The speaker has arrived at his destination.

Ward 7. She lies
in a **white cave of forgetfulness**.

Metaphor: suggesting the white curtains are cave-like. This shows the isolation of the woman, and the poet's exclusion from her.

A **withered hand**
trembles on its stalk. Eyes move
behind eyelids too heavy
to raise. Into an arm **wasted**

Metaphor: suggesting the woman's body is brittle and frail, by comparing it to a dying flower.

of colour a **glass fang is fixed**,
not guzzling but giving.

Word choice: "withered", "trembles", "wasted" all suggest the patient is close to death.

And between her and me

Metaphor/alliteration: suggesting the IV drip is **vampire-like**. The horror in this image is shocking, which shows the poet's grief.

distance shrinks till there is none left
but the **distance of pain that neither she nor I**
can cross.

Enjambment: Poet uses the **gap between lines to emphasise distance** between patient and visitor.

She smiles a little at this
black figure in her white cave
who **clumsily** rises

Metaphor: contrast in colours highlights distance between patient and visitor. "Black figure" could relate to **grim reaper** - returning to the poet's thoughts of death.

in the round **swimming waves of a bell**
and **dizzily** goes off, growing fainter,

Word choice: Bell rings to mark end of visiting hour. "clumsily", "dizzily" "swimming waves", all suggest poet is **struggling with his emotions now**.

not smaller, leaving behind only

books that will not be read

and **fruitless fruits**.

Paradox/oxymoron: the patient's inability to eat the fruit or read the books establishes their **utter lack of life**. The paradox highlights how desperate and hopeless the speaker's situation is and ends on a **sad note of despair**.

KEY THEMES

- Facing Death (either the dying person, or the relative)
- Isolation/loneliness surrounding death or illness

Memorial

This poem is an elegy - a poem that is a lament for the dead - for a beloved person in MacCaig's life. That person is probably MacCaig's sister, Frances, who died in 1968 as this poem was published in 1971. Memorial is a sad (sombre) poem about how the sense of loss of the poet's dear one has taken over every aspect of his life. Her death, he makes clear, stays with him constantly.

Memorial

Everywhere she dies. Everywhere I go she dies.

Repetition: Poet repeats "everywhere" and "no" to create a **striking** opening to the poem. These words emphasise that, in his mind, he cannot escape his loved one's death.

No sunrise, no city square, no lurking beautiful mountain

but has her death in it.

Metaphor/paradox: Poet uses paradox to show this silence is **so intense it impacts as a loud noise would**. As a poet, **words** are hugely important but what he saw as a fun, bright, colourful and musical ride is now silenced by her death.

The silence of her dying sounds through

the carousel of language, it's a web

on which laughter stitches itself. How can my hand

clasp another's when between them

is that thick death, that intolerable distance?

Metaphor: Her death is a **web** - he is **unable to free himself** from its hold. The word "stitches" suggests this hold is very strong.

Word choice: "thick" suggests it is surrounding him, like a fog perhaps. It also emphasises the distance that keeps him apart from others.

Enjambment: Poet indicates the "intolerable distance" by **separating this over many lines to show distance** between himself and his lost loved one.

She grieves for my grief. Dying, she tells me

Paradox: Does not immediately make sense. She feels sorry for the loss he will feel.

that bird dives from the sun, that fish

leaps into it. No crocus is carved more gently

Metaphor: Compares her death to a crocus flower- beautiful, natural and fragile.

than the way her dying

shapes my mind. – But I hear, too,

Tone/structure: Poet changes tone here to a bleak and dark tone of hopelessness.

Word choice/paradox: becomes much darker- these black words suggest a nothingness- the poet believes there is nothing after death.

the other words,
black words that make the sound
of soundlessness, that name the nowhere
she is continuously going into.

Ever since she died
she can't stop dying. She makes me
her elegy. I am a walking masterpiece,
a true fiction
of the ugliness of death.
I am her sad music.

Paradox: Does not immediately make sense, reflecting the confusion the poet feels about death. Poet is saying that his loved one dies over and over again in his mind.

Metaphor: Poet compares himself to being a written lament - he himself has become a tribute to her life, perhaps at the loss of his own identity.

"masterpiece" is a strange word choice as a masterpiece is traditionally seen as perfect.

"true fiction" is an oxymoron as fiction cannot be true. The poet uses these confusing contrasts to emphasise his confused state in losing her.

KEY THEMES

- Facing Death (either the dying person, or the relative)
- Isolation surrounding death/illness

THEMES CONNECT WITH: *Aunt Julia, Visiting Hour.*

Aunt Julia

Norman MacCaig's Aunt Julia lived on Scalpay, a small island off the coast of Harris in the Outer Hebrides. Aunt Julia lived a traditional, hardworking life on a croft and she spoke only her native Gaelic language.

Julia is depicted in a series of striking metaphors that show how the young narrator connects her with elements of nature: with the earth, with water and with air. The last stanza introduces a tone of regret. The reason for this regret is that only after Julia's death did the poet learn enough Gaelic to be able to communicate with her.

Word choice/repetition: Poet begins with affectionate childhood memories of Aunt. Repetition of “very” and “I could not” highlight how difficult/impossible it was to communicate with his Aunt.

Aunt Julia

Aunt Julia spoke Gaelic

very loud and **very fast**.

I could not answer her —

I could not understand her.

She wore men's boots

when she wore any.

— I can see her strong foot,

stained with peat,

paddling with the **treadle of the spinning wheel**

while her right hand **drew yarn**

marvellously out of the air.

Word choice: The fact that she “wears men’s boots when she wore any” suggests a woman that is **practical**. Her work is **physically demanding**, both out of doors and within her house.

Structure: The **long line** “paddling with... spinning wheel” highlights the length of time the spinning process takes or the yarn being drawn out. Aunt Julia is always shown to be moving, **emphasising her hard-working, active nature**.

Word choice: “drew yarn **marvellously** out of the air” conveys the sense of magic or illusion about the task in the eyes of the poet as a child. It suggests he admired her.

Hers was the only house

where I've lain at night

in the **absolute darkness**

Word choice: The poet shows **affection** in his description of his Aunt. Despite the typically frightening “absolute darkness”, the poet seems very **comfortable and safe**. This is clear when the **crickets are shown to be “friendly”**.

of a box bed, listening to
crickets being friendly.

She was buckets
and water flouncing into them.

Metaphor: The poet feels his Aunt is **so close to nature that she is a part of it**. She is shown to be linked directly to both the wind and the rain.

She was winds pouring wetly
round house-ends.

Word choice: The poet also links Julia to a collection of simple domestic objects. These objects show her to be **natural, traditional and careful with money**.

She was brown eggs, black skirts
and a keeper of threepennybits
in a teapot.

Repetition: The poet returns to the opening lines of the poem, **providing a hint that we are coming to the end of the text**.

Aunt Julia spoke Gaelic
very loud and very fast.

Tone: This is a turning point in the poem, as the tone changes here to one of **regret and frustration**.

By the time I had learned
a little, she lay
silenced in the absolute black
of a sandy grave

Word choice: In contrast to the liveliness and activity of Julia's working life, death has **silenced** her. "absolute black" is a reminder of the "absolute darkness" in stanza 3 but this time the darkness is of no comfort.

at Luskentyre. But I hear her still, **welcoming me**
with a seagull's voice
across a hundred yards

Word choice: Julia is still so connected to nature in his mind that **he hears her in the sounds of nature**, even after death. In other words, nature reminds him of her.

of peatscrapes and lazybeds
and **getting angry, getting angry**
with **so many questions**
unanswered.

Repetition: The repetition of the word "**angry**" in these final three lines suggests MacCaig is very frustrated. He is both angry at the questions left by the death of his Aunt but he is also mourning the death of a traditional Scottish way of life. Here he is warning us to hold onto the culture and heritage of the island way of life. He is afraid if we allow it to die, like Aunt Julia, then it too will be lost forever.

KEY THEMES

- Facing Death (either the dying person, or the relative)
- Nature and man's connection to nature

THEMES CONNECT WITH: *Visiting Hour, Memorial.*

VISITING HOUR: Revision Questions

Use the following questions to help you revise 'Visiting Hour' for the exam.

1. Look at stanzas 1 & 2. Where does this poem take place? Write down an example of something the poet mentions that tells us this.
2. In stanza 2 the poet describes a patient being taken away in a lift. Quote two words he uses that connect the poem to the idea of death. Explain why you think he chooses to use these words.
3. Look at stanzas 1, 2 & 3. Explain how you think the speaker **feels** about being in the hospital. Include a quote to support your answer.
4. Look at stanza 4. Explain **in your own words** what the speaker thinks about the nurses he describes.
5. Look at stanza 5: "...in a white cave of forgetfulness". What might be 'white' within the hospital? What does the image of a cave tell us about how the woman is living in the hospital?
6. Look at stanza 5. The poet describes the patient as having "A withered hand" that "trembles on its stalk." What does a "withered stalk" make you think of? Why is this a good image to compare the patient's health to?
7. Look at stanza 5. The poet describes the patient's IV drip as a "glass fang". What creature is he comparing the drip to? What does this suggest about the way he sees the patient?
8. Look at line 35. The poet describes that he is 'growing fainter'. What two different meanings could we understand from this phrase?
9. Look closely at the end of stanza 5. The poet uses enjambment here just before the words "can cross". What could this 'gap' in the poem represent?
10. In the final stanza, the speaker describes himself as a "black figure in her white cave". Why might the woman only be able to see a "black figure?" What "black figure" do you think the poet is also making the reader aware of?
11. Look closely at the words used in the final stanza. Choose one word which tells us that the speaker is having physical difficulty after visiting the patient and analyse the effect this word has.
12. What is strange about the phrase "fruitless fruits?" What do you think this tells us about how the poet feels at the conclusion of the poem?

MEMORIAL: Revision Questions

Use the following questions to help you revise 'Memorial' for the exam.

1. Look at the first two lines of the poem. Explain how MacCaig uses a poetic technique to make this an effective opening.
2. Look at stanza one: "No sunrise, no city square, no lurking beautiful mountain/ but has her death in it." What does this tell us about the poet's grief?
3. Look at stanza one. Explain what MacCaig means when he refers to the "carousel of language." In what way is language like a carousel?
4. Look at stanza one. The poet describes an "intolerable distance." How does he use structure to emphasise this distance?
5. Look at the final three lines of stanza one. **Use your own words** to explain the question the poet is asking.
6. Look at the first line of stanza two: "She grieves for my grief." Explain what poetic technique is being used here, and then explain what you think the poet means when he uses this phrase.
7. Look at stanza two: "...bird dives from the sun, that fish leaps into it." What does this image tell us about how MacCaig has been affected by his loss?
8. Look at stanza two. Explain what do you think the woman's dying has in common with a crocus.
9. Look at stanza two: "But I hear, too, the other words..." Quote two words the poet uses to convey his feelings of sadness here and analyse the effect of these.
10. In the final stanza, MacCaig uses the oxymoron "true fiction." Explain what an oxymoron is and what these two words – "true" and "fiction" – might be referring to.
11. Look at the final lines of the poem. The poet describes himself as an "elegy," a "fiction", and "her sad music." A memorial is usually a focus to a dead person – such as a gravestone. Who or what is the "memorial" referred to in the title of this poem?
12. Look at the **structure** of the poem **overall**. MacCaig uses free verse, with no obvious pattern in the length of the lines or the stanzas. How does this help to reflect the poet's mood, in relation to the poem's themes?

AUNT JULIA: Revision Questions

Use the following questions to help you revise 'Aunt Julia' for the exam.

1. Look at the first two lines of the poem. What technique does MacCaig use to immediately capture the reader's attention?
2. Look at stanza one carefully. Use your own words to explain the problem the poet had with his Aunt.
3. Look at stanza one: "...paddling with the treadle of the spinning wheel." How does MacCaig use structure to help the reader imagine his Aunt at work?
4. Look towards the end of stanza one. Quote a word MacCaig uses to describe Julia, and explain what it tells us about the way he saw her.
5. Look at stanza two. How do you think the poet felt when he visited Aunt Julia's house? Select a quote which supports your answer.
6. In stanza three, the poet uses a number of metaphors to compare Julia to various things, including different kinds of weather ("*She was...*"). Why might the poet have chosen to use metaphors rather than similes? Think about what difference it makes – *she was buckets* rather than *she was like buckets*.
7. Still thinking about the metaphors used in stanza three, what sort of person do these comparisons suggest Aunt Julia was?
8. Look at stanza five. What do you notice about these lines, and why do you think the poet has chosen to do this?
9. Look at the poet's word choice when he says "silenced in the absolute black." What does this suggest about his own views on death?
10. Explain in your own words what you think the poet means when he says "*but I hear her still, welcoming me with a seagull's voice.*"
11. Look at the final lines of the poem – "and getting angry, getting angry with so many questions unanswered." On a simple level, why are questions left unanswered when the poet stayed with his Aunt Julia?
12. Thinking about the same line again, what deeper, more important questions are not being answered for MacCaig?